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### Manifesto Check

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# THE CONVERSATION

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## Manifesto Check: Lib Dems relegate sports to the sidelines

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Lib Dems keep sport on the sidelines. Paul Townsend, CC BY

The Liberal Democrats' 2015 general election manifesto claims to be a “manifesto with opportunity at its heart”. But when it comes to the policies around sports participation and production, it is difficult to spot these opportunities.

Very little space is given over to sport. The manifesto covers only three cross-departmental policy areas. Yet the importance of these points should be recognised: the manifesto opens the debate for safe standing at domestic football matches, then promotes evidence-based “social prescribing” of sport to tackle obesity, mental health problems and other health condition, complemented by work to widen the evidence base. Finally, the manifesto looks at opening up more sport facilities and building more cycle routes to cut obesity and reduce heart problems.

### Safe standing

The Liberal Democrats are the only political party that have placed the delicate issue of safe standing at domestic football into the policy arena, since there have been many tragedies involving football supporters. Indeed, an independent report following the 1989 Hillsborough tragedy recommended that all major stadiums should convert to an all-seater model.

But there is an active social movement among football supporters to open the debate on

safe standing. The Football Supporters Federation has been a leading organisation in attempting to open up dialogue with the government about **safe standing**.

There are examples of safe standing areas across Europe, for example in Germany, Austria and Sweden, featuring rail seating that can be removed to allow fans to stand during matches. The Welsh Assembly also **recently called on the government** to take urgent steps towards introducing safe standing. In doing so, it offered to lead the way, after passing a motion to back a trial, and unveiling provisional new research which shows that a large proportion of supporters back safe standing.

Although the Liberal Democrats have opened up the possibility of a debate going forward, there is no pledge to implement safe standing, despite the fact that it could reduce the financial burden on football supporters, by lowering ticket prices.

## **Evidence-based sports policy**

The Liberal Democrats view sport as well as the arts as a means of tackling health-related problems. Yet they are very clear in their wording that any use of sport and its relationship with health must be backed by evidence. Furthermore, they placed an agenda on using “social prescribing” – a mechanism for linking individuals with local, non-clinical sources of support within communities, usually provided by the third sector. And although it is not stated in the manifesto, there is evidence that such a policy would reduce the burden on both GPs and the National Health Service.

There is not enough information on the pricing of social prescribing to evaluate the cost of this policy, but we know from **local and national studies** that every £1 spent on physical activity leads to about £8 being saved in addressing mental health issues – a key plank of this manifesto. Furthermore, Britain is spending £47 billion a year dealing with the health care and social costs of an **increasingly overweight population**. The call for an evidence-based “social prescribing” is to be welcomed, but investment in research and evaluation must be forthcoming, and this is not made clear in the manifesto.

It is also stated there is a plan to work in widening the evidence base. But there is no pledge or strategy forthcoming to identify how they will achieve this. For example, it is not clear how they will release funds for research in areas of sport and health, or if they will work closely with academics and think tanks.

*The Conversation's **Manifesto Check** deploys academic expertise to scrutinise the parties' plans.*